39 dead from US heat wave

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Weeks of unrelenting heat have left at least 39 people dead and 150 million suffering triple-digit temperatures across the US.

An upper level high-pressure system that moved into the country's mid-section and the South a month ago brought with it extreme heat. In the past week the heat wave spread into the Northeast. The high-pressure system has also intensified a severe drought throughout the southern part of the country.

The prolonged high temperatures pose an extreme threat. According to the National Weather Service (NWS), heat is the number one weather-related killer in the United States. NWS statistics taken between 2000 and 2009 indicate that on average the US experiences 162 heat-related deaths every year.

Currently the NWS has parts of 14 states under excessive heat warning. This means that conditions posing a threat to life or property are present or are very likely to arise in those areas within the next 36 hours. Another 23 states have been issued heat advisories; this designates a less dangerous situation but one that can still lead to fatalities or property damages if precautions are not taken.

The first officially recognized heat-related death of this summer was that of a 52-year-old St. Louis woman who was found dead in her house on June 7. A man in Granite City, Illinois was also found dead in his home, most likely a result of heat stroke, his air conditioner broken. This region of the country along the Mississippi River has been smothered with persistent heat-index readings of 115 degrees and higher, with high humidity.

"The elderly, those with illness, and very young are the most as risk from the heat," Pat Slattery of the NWS told the press. "Fans won't cool you down in this heat; it will just blow around hot air within the house. People need air conditioning to stay cool."

The upper level high-pressure system is not a new phenomenon but a reoccurring weather pattern for central and southern United States sometimes referred to as "La Niña". This year is unique, however, because of the intensity and breadth of the system, with the heat wave on the East Coast reaching as far north as Connecticut.

The US average temperature for this past June was 70.7 degrees making it 1.4 degrees higher than the average temperature for June set between 1901 and 2000 according to the NWS. National precipitation was also 0.41 inches below the national long-term average, with vast regional discrepancies.

Many cities and states broke records in high temperature and low rainfall in June. Texas had an average temperature of 85.2 degrees, making it the highest average temperature on record. Amarillo, Texas set an all time high temperature record on June 24, then broke that record on June 26 with a temperature of 111 degrees.

Lakes in Texas have been drying up due to the lack of rain, with 109 lakes only 73 percent full on average. Cattle auctions in Texas have stepped up as ranchers sell their herds because of the high price of feed brought on by the drought. Texas alone is expected to suffer $3 billion worth of damages caused by the heat wave and drought. It is also expected to raise the cost of beef after an initial lowering, and lead to an increase in cattle prices next year.

Louisiana, New Mexico, and Texas have all recorded the first half of this year as the driest six months on record. New Mexico also registered its driest month of June on record.

The drought has been compared to the Dust Bowl, and will seriously damage the agricultural economy. Coming after a series of devastating spring floods that delayed planting and weakened root formation, the extreme heat threatens to worsen the country's corn crop, a significant portion of which is already listed as

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being in poor or precarious condition.

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma has experienced triple-digit temperatures for the past 14 days, reaching up to 111 degrees this week. Phoenix, Arizona has suffered from temperatures of 100 degrees or more for 33 consecutive days. This extreme heat is expected to continue until next weekend.

Many areas have experienced record-high daily lows, with temperatures at night only dropping down into the 80's, giving little time to cool down.

New York City has experienced blackouts in parts of Manhattan from the strain on the electrical grid. In Chicago Illinois, 868,000 ComEd customers lost power July 11 as a result of a storm passing through the city. By Wednesday, 186,000 customers were still without power.

That vast sections of two of the largest American cities could lose power in the middle of a heat wave is an exposure of the decay of the country's critical infrastructure. The underlying causes of these blackouts are well known and have been warned about for years. Private ownership of the power grids, continual cost-cutting and lack of investment in their maintenance, have resulted in unreliable electrical supply, particularly when demand is high, such as during heat waves. A failure at any point in the system can compound, leading to a shutdown of the entire grid.

The heat wave and drought are reoccurring phenomena that should have well-funded government programs to mitigate their impact and aid those affected by them. Instead, federal and local governments have focused on imposing austerity measures that count among their targets the live-saving programs and physical infrastructure upon which millions depend.

One program especially relied on during heat waves is the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance (LIHEAP), which is designed to help low-income, disabled, and elderly residents pay for electricity. This allows for the poor and vulnerable to use air conditioners, a measure that could save their lives. In Little Rock, Arkansas, according to local news channel KATV, hundreds of residents lined up the State Fairground in near-100F degree weather in order to sign up for this program last week. Many were turned away for lack of proof of residence, proof of last month's income, or their utility bill in hand.

Already drastically under-funded, the LIHEAP program faces massive cuts from the federal government.

Budget cuts on a local level have resulted in the closing of many public pools, which are overwhelmingly visited by the poor as a means of cooling down. In Fort Worth, Texas, all seven public pools have been closed. Phoenix, Arizona has seven of its 29 pools closed for the summer. A number of other public pools throughout the country are only open part-time due to under-staffing or lack of adequate maintenance.

Another option for those suffering from the heat is to go to cooling centers. These are buildings with air conditioning that have either been set up or rented to allow the homeless and those without air conditioning a way to escape the sweltering heat. Such facilities have also been subjected to budget cuts and closures across the country. Public libraries, another air-conditioned public space relied upon by the poor, are likewise reducing their hours or being shuttered in municipalities across the country.

In Joplin, Missouri, where a tornado last May destroyed 30 percent of the city, a cooling center isn't an option. Patricia Robinson who volunteers for the Joplin Red Cross told MSNBC, "The Red Cross building would normally be used as a public cooling center but staff members are still busy helping tornado victims." Other tornado victims in Denning, Arkansas have been forced to live in tents, enduring the full brunt of the extreme heat.

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